

# *Our Faith Pilgrimage*

## with the Hearts of Jesus and Mary

Dear Friends of the Sacred Heart,

A few days ago, our President signed an important executive order, doing so in the Rose Garden of the White House, to emphasize the religious liberty that all Americans are entitled to. Many diverse segments of the American religious community were present at this signing and applauded the foundation that faith has always had in our country's history. The expression of one's faith has now been given new impetus and the promise of new protections from our federal government is a blessed relief to many religious organizations. We can only pray and thank God that this turn of events will promote a renewed zeal to honor and worship our Creator, just as our first founders envisioned.

Working on the exterior of the monastery as its portress, I sometimes encounter profound acts of faith quietly taking place. Several years ago, one such occasion happened that really touched my heart. Called to the front door in late morning, I was introduced to four people whom I had never seen before. They turned out to be a family: mother, father, and two adult children who came to seek out the prayers of our Sisters. I could see that the father, who was already sitting on the bench and who did not rise when I walked out, was in a suffering state. He seemed to be in pain, although the look on this face was strikingly serene. As I learned in the course of my conversation with them, the prayers they were requesting were for him. He did not have long to live as cancer had already claimed most of his bodily health. Although saddened, the family radiated what could only be described as a deep peace. They were opened to whatever God's providence sent their way and the prayers they desired were for the strength to persevere in their trust in God. I took away from that experience an unexpected blessing: that living faith is still very much alive in the lives of ordinary people.

As we know, faith was a crucial component in the lives of our biblical ancestors throughout the Old and New Testaments, and cannot be dispensed with even in our sophisticated world of advanced technology. Every living person's heart has the potential for a faith response to God... to Jesus... to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. The deeper our response of faith, the stronger the transformational power says Jesus, for "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" {Mt 17: 20}.

In a beautiful passage taken from the letter to the Ephesians we are told that Christ will dwell in our hearts by faith {Ephesians 3: 17}. In the revelations of the Sacred Heart given to Saint Margaret Mary, the message is clearly communicated as well: "If you believe you will see the power of my heart." So many times this exhortation to faith is recommended as the surest means of availing ourselves to God's divine presence. Yet to give our whole-hearted assent and consent to the work of God can be very hard. Faith challenges us to look ever beyond, to experience beyond, to understand beyond, and to act beyond what our best reasoning and resources would otherwise dictate. Whenever we are asked to go beyond anything, there is immediately released an element of fear that comes unbidden into our hearts and minds. Someone described it thusly: "Not just fear, but THE fear... the fear that limits the possibilities of human life... fear of death... fear of self... fear of the universe. What is most important is not the power of nature, or fate, or political, or economic forces, but *the power of the God of Life itself.*"

I find this very true in my own experience. I love to hear and read about the lives and stories of people who have a profound sense of faith in God. I feel inspired by their witness and have a desire to follow their example. But if a crisis arises, I feel the crunch of faith. Faith exacts a price because the human mind and heart are so quick to generate objections. Immediately within

the heart there is a surge to find a solution and dispel the need for faith. So it is that the crux of faith touches each one of us on a very personal level. No one can force us to believe something or someone that we really do not want to believe. It is a choice that only each individual person can make and continue to make on his or her own. It deepens and increases as our commitment becomes one of total trust in God. As we know from the biblical sources, the faith of God's chosen ones was tried. Our faith is going to be tested too. Our faith may be pushed to the extremes as was theirs. God may appear to hide so deeply that it may even seem that we are forsaken; that God has not heard, or cared to come to our assistance.

Again, from my own experience I can say that one of the greatest obstacles keeping us from the presence of God is a nameless discouragement that sometimes wells up from some deep cavern within us. When distractions don't go away, when feelings of comfort and consolation are sparse, when a kind of lethargy is present, it is difficult to sustain an optimistic and hope filled attitude. Sooner or later our pilgrimage to the Heart of God comes to an impasse when a crucial choice must be made. Either we opt to continue on the journey with trust and surrender or we stagnate in a kind of fogginess that brings us to a halt. God seems far, far away at such moments, but actually we are beckoned to step out into the darkness and trust his guiding hand. A comment I recently came across from Saint Faustina proved enlightening in this regard: "I fervently beg the Lord to strengthen my faith, so that in my drab, everyday life I will not be guided by human dispositions, but by those of the spirit. Oh, how everything drags man towards the earth! But lively faith maintains the soul in the higher regions and assigns self-love its proper place; that is to say, the lowest one" {Diary #210}.

The Cistercian monk Thomas Merton also has some insightful words for us. Writing on the subject of faith and prayer he offers this advice: "For us let it be enough to know ourselves to be in the place where God wants us, and carry on our work, even though it be no more than the work of an ant, infinitesimally small, and with unforeseeable results. Now is the hour of the garden and the night, the hour of the silent offering, therefore the hour of hope: God alone, faceless, unknown, unfelt, yet undeniably God." Another marvelous thought about building up our faith comes from St. Francis de Sales, who says this: "Let us keep on and on, making our way through the dark valleys; let us live with the cross in our arms, humble and patient. What does it matter whether God's voice comes to us amongst thorns or amongst flowers? Indeed, I do not remember that God has ever spoken where there are flowers, but his voice has often been heard in deserts and thorny bushes."

As the Catholic community worldwide prepares to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the Fatima apparitions on May 13th of this year, we can stand in awe of the tremendous impact which these heavenly visitations have had on the faith of millions of people. The statue which represents our Lady of Fatima has travelled all over the world reminding pilgrims that they are very much in the thoughts and hearts of the Mother and her Son. Mary's revelations to the three shepherd children stress the importance of not relinquishing our faith to the forces of secularism and questionable ideologies, but turning our inward attention constantly to 'the things that are above.' This is the recurring theme for so many marian apparitions, but particularly at Fatima do we hear of the need for our co-operation with God's grace to mold our hearts *through a kind of spiritual discipline* that prevents us from falling prey to the self-indulgence that pushes God completely out of our lives. We can get a glimpse of this happening right in our homes where even a religious object or picture is no longer displayed. Rarely does one see a crucifix, let alone a statue of the Sacred Heart or of Mary. Displaying one's faith is hardly considered serious in our day, being reserved instead for the most private of spaces.

So it is particularly through the messages of the Immaculate Heart of Mary at Fatima that we are given a means of working through the blurred thinking of our day, making ourselves available to the light of the Holy Spirit, as Mary was, and enabling us to properly assess how God is really leading us. Mary desires our hearts to be in tune with hers where we can join her in pondering over God's presence in our everyday lives, in entrusting ourselves to God's providence through difficult situations, and in standing true to our faith under the cross of her Son.

During this season of Paschaltide we hear again and again the promise of peace which the Lord Jesus wishes for his followers. This, too, is an important theme of Fatima. The idea of 'total peace' is almost inconceivable in our day. Recently a friend of my sister's whose son is serving in an intelligence post within the military, said that we will *always* be fighting a war somewhere in the world. Yet, peace is the continual message that is brought to us through the Sacred Heart and the Immaculate Heart. Our personal journeys of faith with the Two Hearts cannot be authenticated unless we are touched by true peace, both interior and exterior, so we must hope that this gift of peace will somehow be realized. As Mary promised at Fatima, "My Immaculate Heart will be your refuge and the way that will lead you to God." When this *spiritual* triumph has its day, then we will taste the fruits of peace. However until then, our pilgrimage must be one of faithful adherence to the ways of the Lord where we daily renew our efforts and place our inner spirits close to the sacred wound of Christ's pierced heart and Mary's immaculate heart seeking the grace of a faith that will remain unshaken. +

---

*This talk on Sacred Heart spirituality was given in our Gathering Room on May 7th, 2017. If you would like to attend similar presentations by the Sisters, our next talk will be held on Sunday, June 4th, 2017 at 4:00 p.m.*